DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 496 CG 027 020

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TITLE Women and Work-Place Stress. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, Ottawa (Ontario).; ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-95-53
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002004
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Employed Women; Employment; *Females; Foreign Countries; Occupational Mobility; Occupational Safety and Health; Self Management; Sex Differences; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Bias; *Stress Management; *Stress Variables; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Employee Health; ERIC Digests; *Job Stress

ABSTRACT

With North American women joining the work force in record numbers, the effect of employment on women's well-being is gaining attention. This digest examines various stressors affecting women in the work world and some actions companies can take to alleviate these stressors. While some studies show that work has detrimental effects on some females, other studies point to the beneficial health benefits work may provide for women. In general, women who work seem to be better off than women who do not work. Most women are employed in a limited number of occupations and many of these jobs have little autonomy and low pay. Likewise, the lack of career progress and job mobility contribute to women's stress. New programs and education may help to relieve these conditions. While organizations recognize the costs of stress to women, researchers have suggested a wide range of strategies aimed at preventing or eliminating women's experience of work stress. Some of these suggestions include pay and benefit equity for women, elimination of occupational segregation, producing a bias-free job evaluation program, supporting educational opportunities for women, and providing more job flexibility for women and men to better manage work home conflicts. (RJM)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995

EDO-CG-95-53

Women and Work-Place Stress

Bonita C. Long

Overview

North American women have joined the paid work force in record numbers and much-needed attention is now focused on the effect employment has on women's well-being (Long & Kahn, 1993). Until recently, theories and research about job stress have been directed primarily at men's experiences, as a result, women's experiences of stress have remained relatively unexplored.

The conceptual literature on stress suggests that working women are prone to the same stressors experienced by working men. Yet, women are also confronted with potentially unique stressors such as discrimination, stereotyping, social isolation, and work/home conflicts. In addition, taking care of children and aging parents continues to be a source of stress for women who work outside the home (Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989).

Even though women in the paid work force face numerous stressors, the conventional wisdom that work is necessarily harmful to women has not been proven. Repetti et al. (1989) found little evidence to support a global relationship between paid employment and either mental or physical health in women. Instead, they found that paid employment had clearly beneficial health effects for some women and clearly detrimental effects on others. These effects depended on the characteristics of the individual woman, her family situation, and the properties of her job:

- Employment contributes to greater health benefits for unmarried women than for married women.
- For married women, employment has more health benefits if their husbands participate more in house hold labor.
- Employment has beneficial effects when there is a match between a woman's desire for employment and her employment status.
- Job characteristics such as heavy demands and low control increase health risks.
- Some women derive greater satisfaction from employment roles than from traditional roles as wife, mother, and community volunteer.
- Work relationships that provide social support appear to improve health.

Obviously, the global conclusion that employment is inherently harmful to women in unwarranted. Employed women experience a multitude of work-related stressors, yet they appear to be better off than women who are not employed. Although multiple roles for women produce a number of benefits, certain work conditions are deleterious to women's well-being (Repetti et al., 1989).

Sex Segregation as a Source of Stress

While women's work-force participation has doubled in the last 25-30 years, most women are still employed in a limited number of occupations, performing labor different from the kind of labor performed by men. For example, while 6 out of every 10 women are in the paid labor force, 58% of Canadian women work in clerical, sales, or service occupations. Men are employed in a wider range of jobs and more frequently hold higher paying jobs (Statistics Canada, 1990). Sex segregation of work roles creates further stressors unique to women. For example, secretaries, waitresses, and nurses experience high demands, but receive limited autonomy and low pay. Routine, bureaucratic work is common in female dominated jobs (e.g., clerical work). In addition, women in jobs that remain male-dominated often experience social isolation—a situation that limits women's opportunities for social support. Although women are joining the paid work force in record numbers and are moving into men's occupations, men are not moving into women's occupations. Until women's work is valued as much as men's work, this imbalance is unlikely to change.

Barriers to Career Progress as Stressors

Another important stressor for employed women is the lack of career progress. While this is a potential stressor for all employees, it is particularly problematic for women because they are clustered in the lower levels of the hierarchy. For example, women hold only 2% of senior management positions and only 5% of corporate board positions (Friedman, 1988). An explanation for this finding is that stereotypes and biases of male decision-makers prevent women's career advancement. The barrier formed by these biases has been referred to as the "glass ceiling."

The well-known Framingham Heart Study showed that women's health may be jeopardized by such barri-

ers (Haynes & Feinleib, 1980). One of the major predictors of coronary heart disease among female clerical workers was decreased job mobility. Furthermore, women reported more job changes but fewer promotions than did men, indicating that their upward mobility may be severely constrained.

If barriers to career progress are related to decision-making processes—and there is evidence that managers use decision models that systematically discriminate against women (Hitt & Barr, 1989)— then programs need to be developed that focus on the decision-making behaviors of male managers. Education is another way to decrease occupational segregation. Thus, organizations can encourage continued education through such means as tuition refund programs and flexible work schedules (Nelson & Hitt, 1992).

Addressing Women's Work-Place Stress

While organizations recognize the costs of stress to women, researchers and authors have suggested a wide range of strategies aimed at preventing or eliminating women's experience of work stress. The suggestions range from individually focused actions to broad based organizational policy changes (Freedman & Phillips, 1988; Nelson & Hitt, 1992). These include the following:

- Promote equity in pay and benefits for women.
- Promote benefit programs of special interest to women.
- Eliminate occupational segregation.
- Produce a bias-free job evaluation program.
- Provide equal starting salaries for jobs of equal value.
- Support educational opportunities for women.
- Educate men regarding importance of sharing responsibilities outside of work.
- Provide parental leave, day care, and alternative work scheduling as resources for preventing stress.
- Provide more job flexibility for women and men to better manage work home conflicts.
- Promote childcare and eldercare options in the community or the organization.
- Support programs to educate and develop skills among women for managing and controlling organizational politics.

Conclusion

In recent years much has been learned about the unique stressors which employed women experience, as well as some of the health-related outcomes resulting from these stressors. Policies and programs need to be developed that are preventive in focus in order for women to maximize their career potential, and thus allow organizations to benefit from the rich resources that women bring to the work force.

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